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ABSTRACT

A study examined what adult literacy tutors believe about literacy and how their beliefs affect the learner-tutor matches. It began with the assumptions that tutors are important actors in the tutor-learner relationship and that their beliefs and behavior will affect the tutoring relationship. The research site was a literacy program organized and funded by undergraduate students at a Canadian university. Research was conducted using case study methodology; data were gathered during semi-structured interviews with 18 tutors entering the program and being trained; those who had tutored for several months; and coordinators with 1 year of experience. An initial data analysis indicated almost all tutors said their learners had made little or no progress, yet these tutors also had made little effort to use the support and resources of the organization to encourage more learning. Tutors were found to share the following belief system: tutors believe a learner who does not succeed in a classroom learning format will be helped by one-on-one tutoring; while recognizing the wide variety of learner needs, tutors rely on individual attention rather than specific training to function in the match; tutors value good will over good training; and tutors defend their volunteer activities based on perceived needs rather than demonstrable progress and results. (Contains 13 references and an interview schedule.) (YLB)

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WORKING PAPERS ON LITERACY

Working Paper No.3

• Behaviour and beliefs of volunteer literacy tutors

by Catherine Hambly, MA

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WORKING PAPERS ON LITERACY

Working Papers on Literacy is an initiative of The Centre for Literacy. Through this occasional series of monographs, we hope to broaden perspectives and stimulate debate on literacy-related issues.

Some of the papers in the series are reprints of articles that have previously appeared in our newsletter, *Literacy Across the Curriculum/ Media Focus*, and have generated interest and requests for copies. Others are papers that we have invited from well-known commentators or produced as outcomes of our own projects. Still others are the work of promising new researchers.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the philosophy of The Centre for Literacy. We welcome responses.

The Centre for Literacy is a resource and teacher-training centre that provides linking, training, research, and information services to support and promote the understanding of literacy in the schools, the workplace and the community. The Centre connects teachers, trainers, researchers, human resource officers, policy-makers and media across Canada and internationally.

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PREFACE

This is the third paper published by The Centre for Literacy in its Working Papers in Literacy series which present fresh perspectives on literacy-related issues. The topics are relevant both to other researchers, to practitioners in the field and to policy-makers.

Working Papers 1 and 2 were written by well-known commentators. But we also support new voices. This paper is the first we've published by a promising new researcher. It has been developed from a Master's thesis in the Faculty of Education, McGill University, by Catherine Hambly, who will receive her degree in the Spring of 1998.

The role of volunteers in literacy has not been subject to much systematic research. This qualitative study of volunteers' beliefs and behaviours had the full cooperation of a volunteer organization which was interested in examining itself. Ms. Hambly acknowledges the limitations of the work and cautions against generalizing to all volunteer organizations. However, she has raised questions worth asking in other groups. Beyond the interest of the paper itself, the research has had practical outcomes. The organization studied is using it as the starting point for some critical self-assessment that they hope will lead to improved service provision to their clients. The field can only benefit from such research-practice links.

A condensed version of this paper appeared in *Literacy Across the Curriculum/Media Focus*, Volume 13, No. 3. This is the first appearance of the full article.

Dr. Linda Shohet
Director, The Centre for Literacy
May 1998

Behaviour and beliefs of volunteer literacy tutors

by Catherine Hambly, MA
(McGill University 1998)

Summary of thesis

This paper examines the behaviours and beliefs of a group of volunteer tutors to discover why they did not maintain close contact with their literacy organization. After describing the tutors' behaviour in the matches with learners, the study draws a link from an apparent contradiction– that tutors desire to help their learners but are complacent about learners' progress– to a belief system shared by these tutors. This shared belief system underlies their disinclination to seek or receive support from the organization.

Beliefs

• Tutors believe that a learner who does not succeed in a classroom learning format will be helped by one-on-one tutoring.

• Tutors, while recognizing the wide variety of learner needs, rely on individual attention rather than specific training to function in the match.

• Tutors value good will over good training.

• Tutors defend their volunteer activities based on perceived needs rather than demonstrable progress and results.

The four beliefs outlined in this paper are:

1. *Tutors believe that a learner who does not succeed in a classroom learning format will be helped by one-on-one tutoring.*

2. *Tutors, while recognizing the wide variety of learner needs, rely on individual attention rather than specific training to function in the match.*

3. *Tutors value good will over good training.*

4. *Tutors defend their volunteer activities based on perceived needs rather than demonstrable progress and results.*

These beliefs are explored within the context of one volunteer literacy organization, but the nature of the beliefs indicate that they could be present in other programs. Further research on this topic is necessary.

Introduction

Many adult literacy organizations use a one-on-one model of instruction where the organization recruits and trains tutors who then meet with assigned learners for regular one-on-one learning sessions. Tutors help learners plan and work towards their goals, and act as partners in the learning process. While some research is available on the adult learners in such programs, few studies, to date, have examined what their tutors believe about literacy and how their beliefs affect the learner-tutor matches.

This study began with the assumptions that tutors are important actors in the tutor-learner relationship, and that their beliefs and behaviour will affect the tutoring relationship. A better understanding of how and why tutors act in certain ways will help the volunteer programs improve training and support for their volunteers and could ultimately improve the quality of tutoring.

Although a few studies have been done on tutors, most were conducted more than a decade ago. (Charnley & Jones, 1978; Trabert, 1986). Several more recent studies have addressed the roles of tutors in literacy organizations. Aaron (1997) highlights the need for more tutor support in Montreal-area literacy organizations. Sanders, Reine, Devins and Wiebe (1996) explore how applying 50/50 Management principles (DuPrey, 1992) allowed them to maintain a balance between intake and support functions in their organization. Hayes (1996) and D'Annunzio (1994) show how a literacy tutoring placement for university student tutors in a credit course makes a positive impact on the learners and on the students' own personal development. Newman (1993) documents how university student tutors reproduce "teacher" roles when tutoring becomes difficult. Those studies represent important progress in our understanding of tutors, and this study builds on their foundation by examining a central concern of many literacy organizations: how to support tutors when many tutors do not keep in close contact with their organization.

Many volunteer tutors in one-on-one literacy programs do not keep in close contact with their training agency, nor do they rely on the support system available to them. While this is not true of all tutors, nor of all programs, it is a common phenomenon. This study associates this behaviour, which will be referred to as tutors "distancing themselves" from their organization, with a system of beliefs that influences a tutor to work independently of the

organization, whether or not the match is proceeding well. This relationship between beliefs and behaviour surfaced in a case study of one volunteer literacy program and thus cannot be generalized to other programs. However, the pervasiveness of the beliefs among the tutor participants and the nature of the beliefs suggest that it could be present in other programs. Further research on this topic is necessary.

Research Site

The research site was a literacy program organized and funded by undergraduate students at a Canadian university. This study focuses exclusively on the approximately 40 tutors involved each year in their one-on-one literacy program. This organization was chosen because of its active and weil-established one-on-one tutoring program and because its tutors and organizers are drawn from a relatively homogeneous population of university students, allowing for comparison of their beliefs and behaviour. The researcher was known to the organization as a former tutor with its program (1995-1996) as well as with a similar program at another university (1993-1994). The study was conducted in 1997-1998 with the cooperation of the program's organizing teams.

Methodology

The research was conducted using case-study methodology, since this methodology permits in-depth investigation of a particular phenomenon within a specific site. The case-study method (Merriam, 1990) is useful in constructing theory when there is no existing theory "to provide an adequate or appropriate explanation" (Merriam, 1990, p. 59). The research findings cannot be generalized to other tutors or organizations, but it is hoped that this study will raise questions and provoke further research into volunteer tutor beliefs and behaviour.

Data were gathered during semi-structured interviews with eighteen tutors including those who were entering the program and being trained (4 individuals), those who had tutored for several months (10 individuals), and those who were coordinators (generally with a years' tutoring experience) (4 individuals). Participants in the first two groups were randomly selected, while in the last group all four coordinators agreed to participate. Although Seidman (1991) recommends purposeful selection in qualitative research, random selection was used where possible to avoid bias from the organization toward tutors known to them and to protect participant anonymity.

Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to one and a half hours. All interviews were based on the same set of questions (See Appendix, p. 13), although the order in which they were presented varied. The four beliefs were mainly derived from the following two questions.

- If you had to write a letter to the minister of adult education about adult learners and literacy, what would you say?

- Many adult educators don't think volunteer tutors have enough training to be able to tutor adults effectively in literacy, and that volunteers should only be used as teacher's aides. How would you respond?

All interviews were conducted, taped and transcribed by the researcher. Data analysis followed Glaser and Strauss' (1967) four-stage constant comparative method. Coding methods were

influenced by Miles and Huberman's (1994) descriptive coding and Strauss and Corbin's (1990) method of open coding. Preliminary categories were established by the interview questions and more detailed categories emerged as patterns surfaced within the data.

Tutor behaviour

- *We do beneficial things, but I don't see a big improvement...*
- *It's difficult to make progress...it's not something that's a huge aspect of [the learner's] life...*
- *It's difficult to advance with only two and a half hours a week...*

During an initial analysis of the data, a curious situation surfaced: almost all tutors stated that their learners had made little or no progress, yet these tutors also had made little effort to use the support and resources of the organization to encourage more learning. Given that people volunteer with a desire to help someone, this lack of contact with the organization in face of questionable progress seems contradictory.

It is important to note that learner "progress" is not measured by the organization (using tests, portfolios, etc), and that the tutors' reports of progress are subjective reports. Their learners could not be interviewed for this study. The tutors' reports of how much progress their learner had made indicated some tutor dissatisfaction with the match. Only one tutor was completely positive about the learner's progress (and notably this learner was involved in formal education outside the organization); all the other tutors gave a mixed report. Three tutors reported little progress; seven other tutors reported that they felt inadequate, lacked feedback from their learners, did not have enough direction in the tutoring, or sensed that the learner was not committed to the relationship or was not communicating needs.

Despite tutors' poor assessment of their learners' progress, the tutors did not turn to the coordinators or use other resources in the organization for advice and support. Contact between tutors and the coordinators monitoring their matches is supposed to occur in two ways: tutors are asked to submit monthly progress reports, and coordinators are supposed to call the tutors to check in with them at regular intervals.

Tutors rarely fill out the monthly progress reports. One tutor stated: "It forces me to evaluate [the learner] and I don't want to." This tutor also commented: "It's constraining and silly. If I fill out a monthly report who beside me will know what's going on?" This rejection of "evaluation" indicates that tutors may not how see how their match fits into a larger organization that needs to keep records. More importantly, it may signal that tutors are uncomfortable with evaluating progress and reporting on the learning content of the match. The coordinators who receive the forms were also divided on the issue: one mentioned that it is difficult to note progress every month, and that since tutors are constantly changing during the match, "whose progress is being evaluated?" Two coordinators stated that tutors need to know that their actions go beyond them, and that the forms assist both the coordinators and future tutors. The other coordinator noted that the forms only get done by those tutors who are dedicated to the organization, drawing an interesting distinction between tutors who are dedicated to their learners and tutors who are dedicated to both their learner and the organization.

The level of phone contact between coordinators and tutors was also low. The coordinators reported that although some tutors regularly discuss their matches, others only say "It's fine." Some tutors do not perceive that the coordinators can offer adequate assistance. One tutor complained that the coordinator had given a wrong impression about a match, and another stated that when asked for advice, the coordinator didn't give any constructive help.

Significantly, some tutors indicated that the lack of contact (form/phone) was a function of themselves and not the coordinators: the support network seemed accessible, but the tutors decided they didn't need it for their match.

The preliminary analysis of data thus showed an incongruity between the tutors' desires to help, their commitment to the matches in time and energy, and their acts of distancing themselves from the organization despite expressed needs.

The data were then analyzed more deeply with a focus on what the tutors believe about their activities. This was fruitful: four beliefs related to two main features of the organization's program– individualized learning and volunteerism– emerged. These help explain why tutors continue in matches while at the same time not seeking support to improve their training and expedite the learners' progress.

The following statements present four beliefs that influence the tutors in this study to choose only a loose relationship with the organization despite the questionable progress of their learners:

1. Tutors believe that a learner who does not succeed in a classroom learning format will be helped by one-on-one tutoring.
2. Tutors, while recognizing the wide variety of learner needs, rely on individual attention rather than specific training to function in the match.
3. Tutors value good will over good training.
4. Tutors defend their volunteer activities based on perceived needs rather than demonstrable progress and results.

Statements 1 and 2 are related to the way literacy education is presented during training in the organization based on theories of individualized learning. Statements 3 and 4 revolve around perceptions of volunteer programs. Each statement will be examined individually in the next section.

Statement 1

Tutors believe that a learner who does not succeed in a classroom learning format will be helped by one-on-one tutoring.

This statement is based on two different patterns in the data: a criticism of classroom learning, and a belief in the value of individual attention for better learning. Tutors in this study were quite critical of the "education system." Although the open-ended question used to elicit responses asked "If you wrote a letter to the minister of education about *adult learners* and literacy, what would you say?" most responses ignored the adult learner focus and centred on criticism of the Canadian education system in general. Very few of the tutors demonstrated an awareness of how adult education operates in their province. Although their criticisms may be valid, they generalized their perceptions of the education system to include all branches—including adult education. Their criticisms focused on the flaws of classroom-based learning, such as insensitive teachers, a

Many tutors admitted that they didn't feel prepared for tutoring after the training, although several qualified that by stating that "each learner is different so you can't go in prepared for anyone."

wide spectrum of student needs within groups, students who "fall through the cracks" in the "traditional" school system, and students who are "herded along" or streamed through "teacher-developed equations." Some comments specifically mentioned the supposed vulnerability of adults in group settings and questioned why adults would return to a school setting where they previously encountered problems. Adult education programs were criticized for their ineffectiveness and for not paying over-stressed teachers enough. These tutors accept the organization's learning philosophy of one-on-one instruction as being the alternative.

Tutors were generally quite positive about the benefits of one-on-one instruction. Tutors believe that the one-on-one format is more productive and that the learner can be more relaxed. Learners can benefit from the networking aspects of the interaction, and can also concentrate on their weaknesses more. These characteristics reflect the profile of one-on-one tutoring as presented during their training.

As evidenced by their responses, tutors accepted a duality between classroom-based instruction and individual instruction without considering other alternatives. This duality could be a consequence of the organization's decision to use only one-on-one tutoring for adults. Given that few tutors were able to talk specifically about adult education, this duality could also be interpreted within the tutors' general lack of awareness of the field of adult literacy education. The belief, illustrated in statement 1, reflects a limited exposure to other practices of literacy education, and as a result, an unquestioned reliance on the value of individual instruction.

Statement 2

Tutors, while recognizing the wide variety of learner needs, rely on individual attention rather than on specific training to function in the match.

Tutors leave the initial training session acknowledging that literacy learners have a range of needs, skills and experiences. This recognition of range is heightened through the match, when tutors are faced with learners whose skills and needs were often not anticipated. Many tutors admitted that they didn't feel prepared for tutoring after the training, although several qualified that by stating that "each learner is different so you can't go in prepared for anyone."

Training materials, while they recognize the wide variety of learner needs, insist that these can be met by using common sense and building a trusting relationship. A paragraph in the training book used by the organization states:

> Since every student is unique, an individual approach is needed for each one...learning must remain in the hands and minds of the learners. They have a lifetime of thoughts that can come pouring out if trust is developed. Reading can be made more complicated than it really is. Rather than relying on methods with which students have not been successful, it is more productive for tutors to think of common sense solutions to individual difficulties (Carpenter, 1986, p.33).

This reliance on individual attention to meet a variety of unique needs is transferred from the coordinators to the tutors through the training sessions. The tutors are also aware that the coordinators receive little more training than the tutors themselves do.

While this philosophy legitimizes tutors who have no experience or background in the teaching of reading, learning disabilities or education, it also creates tutors who believe that they can do it on their own. This message downplays the role of advanced training and support or supervision for literacy tutors and is reinforced when tutors are able to advance to coordinator and administrative positions without additional training.

Statement 3

Tutors value good will over good training.

- *Programs need to be set up with good teachers who want to teach.*
- *They criticize volunteers just to save their jobs. Tutors are needed until unlimited all-motivated adult educators can take over.*
- *Teachers come in because they're paid.*
- *Volunteers come with a pretty good attitude; they'll try.*
- *Some volunteers are highly trained because they're motivated to do good, they don't expect in return.*
- *I can understand the point that if you just put an unprepared person who can read [with learners] and just say "Teach them" there are a lot of things that one has to deal with...and it could be more damaging to everyone to put this volunteer, untrained, in. But what is a professional teacher but someone who's just been trained and a volunteer doesn't necessarily have to be untrained. Having a degree doesn't make you a good teacher; it's a personality type.*

Motivation and preparation are key factors in learning situations. As mentioned, volunteer tutors are highly critical of the education system and particularly of teachers they perceive as being insensitive to students' needs or lacking a true vocation. The emphasis in the comments above address issues of motivation for teaching as much as or more than preparation for the job. Good-will and motivation emerge as being more important to the tutors than extensive preparation. Tutors believe that motivation based on good-will is the most important qualification to be a good teacher/tutor. The differences between their training (approximately 10 hours) and that of licensed teachers are minimized to a ridiculous degree. The tutors' perceptions of their own roles in literacy provision are based on perceived deficits in the adult education sector, namely that teachers do not care, are not committed to their students, and teach because they are paid to do so. In contrast, the tutors see themselves as doing their best and trying to help. Because of their sense of good-will, the tutors feel they have the most necessary characteristics to do the job, which may influence them to feel that additional training or help is unnecessary.

Statement 4

Tutors defend their volunteer activities based on perceived needs rather than demonstrable progress and results.

- *Having someone taught more slowly or not focused on the perfect path is better than nothing at all.*
- *The work can be useless sometimes... but I don't think there can be a major screw-up, which is perhaps what these people are afraid of... I think from certain matches no one gets anything out of it and that happens, but I don't think there's too much damage that can be done.*

Good-will and motivation emerge as being more important to the tutors than extensive preparation.

Tutors recognize that although they do their best, the learners may not make large improvements, or the learners may learn at a slower rate than if a better-trained person was with them. Nevertheless, they believe that some help is better than no help.

- *It's not doing any harm but I'm sure a trained person would have much better progress.*

- *I think tutoring is like medicine. First of all, you should do no harm, and there's a lot of teachers out there doing harm...So I think if you have the right heart, and you at least do no harm, then it doesn't necessarily make you a good teacher but at least, like I said, you're doing no harm.*

- *You would lose everyone [if tutors could only work as teacher's aides]; [there are] not enough good-well-trained teachers. That would reduce manpower.*

- *It's needed, so why not provide it?*

- *There are no teachers volunteering—the club wants to help and is doing it.*

- *People come to volunteer organizations because there's not enough out there.*

- *You can't come down on everything that isn't done with years of experience or nothing will get done.*

Tutors recognize that although they do their best, the learners may not make large improvements, or the learners may learn at a slower rate than if a better-trained person was with them. Nevertheless, they believe that some help is better than no help. This belief works in conjunction with the tutors' assurance that although they may do little or no good, they are at least doing no harm.

Why then do tutors continue? Tutors remain in matches because they believe that they are meeting needs not met by the education system. This belief is the most pervasive of the four. The tutor comments in this section show how the tutors delineate their actions within an area of high demand and unmet needs. They believe their actions– even if they don't help much– are necessary because without the volunteer sector, no one would be there to help.

The effect of this belief, however, can work against the desired outcomes. When tutors feel that their help is 'better than nothing', the focus of the match is more easily lost. An adult learner may not be willing to invest time in an endeavour where visible results and outcomes are unclear. Complacency towards progress should not be part of an organization committed to learning.

Conclusion

The combination of these four beliefs creates tutors who feel inadequate yet who function independently because they are motivated and because they believe there is no one better volunteering for the job. These beliefs are traced back to the nature of the program: the volunteers have been told that they are essential to literacy provision, and they are not aware of other educational opportunities for their learners. Public opinion on the state of education in Canada may lead these tutors to consider their program as a necessary alternative. Faced with well-publicized, alarming figures on the scope of "illiteracy" and its impact on the adult learner, the tutors believe that what help they can offer is necessary and must therefore be good enough. Because the organization promotes people from tutors to coordinators within the ranks of the program, little extra training is available that would help the program examine alternate systems of literacy education. Because specific training cannot be given to each tutor for each specific learner, tutors must trust that their common sense and their own skills are enough.

All of these beliefs interact to allow the tutor to keep the match outside the supervision of the organization. This is not a good situation for the tutor, the learner, or the organization.

Recommendations

Several suggestions can be made on how to respond to this system of beliefs:

1. Tutors should be made aware from the start that they are accountable to the organization. The organization needs to provide ongoing training, require extra training as tutors take on new responsibilities, and forge closer links with specialists who can serve as consultants.

2. Tutors need to learn about the adult education sector and about the variety of ways of offering adult literacy instruction.

3. Tutors need to recognize that their efforts have an impact on the learner's life and future aspirations. This should foster accountability to the organization and a desire to seek help for the learner and ongoing training for themselves.

More research is necessary to understand what tutors in the volunteer sector believe and how they behave, given the economic importance of volunteer work in Canada, and the fact that the volunteer sector is a significant provider of adult literacy. However, volunteer programs need to be able to examine, in an objective manner, the functions and outcomes of their activities before any research can be proposed. Unfortunately, volunteer organizations often lack the financial and personnel resources necessary for research projects. They also often have a distrust of formal research. Despite these obstacles, more research is needed.

Programs can benefit from the results. The organization involved in this study is currently evaluating their one-on-one tutoring program in light of the findings, and is working toward improving the training and support of their tutors. Ultimately, they hope to offer a better service to their learners.

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Age
2. Sex
3. Language spoken
4. Program at university
5. Previous volunteer/teaching experience
6. Future goals
7. Amount of time in the program

MATCH DATA

8. Distance travelled to meet with learner/tutor (how far did the tutor and learner travel to reach their sessions?)
9. Number of sessions/weeks
10. Length of sessions
11. Length of breaks over holidays, exam periods
12. Where were sessions held?

TUTOR BACKGROUND

13. How did you learn about this program?
14. What made you want to join the program?
15. How did you view literacy before the training? What kind of learners did you expect?

EXPERIENCE AS A TUTOR

16. How did the training affect the way you define literacy and what you expected in a learner?
17. When you meet with your learner, what are the sessions like? (relationship, methods, materials)
18. How would you describe the relationship you have with the learner?
19. Has the relationship changed over time?
20. How do you and the learner decide what to work on in a session? What goals do you set?
21. How do you keep the motivation and momentum for the sessions going?

BELIEFS ABOUT LITERACY AND LITERACY VOLUNTEERISM

22. Given your experience as a tutor, how would you now define literacy?
23. I'll read a quotation, and I'd like you to comment on it. Do you agree, disagree? What stands out?

    "Five million adult Canadians are marching against their will in an army of illiterates. These illiterates are an army in number only. Darkness and hopelessness are usually their banners. The pictures is not totally bleak. Many illiterates say they are satisfied with their lives"(from Willinsky quoting Calamai)
24. If you had to write a letter to the Minister of Education about adult learners and literacy, what would you say?
25. What characteristics are important in a tutor, in a learner?
26. Have you ever considered becoming a teacher? If yes, how have your experiences with Student Centered Individualized Learning and one-on-one tutoring influenced your choice or how you want to teach?
27. Many adult educators don't think volunteer tutors have enough training to be able to tutor adults effectively in literacy, and that volunteers should only be used as teacher's aides. How would you respond?
28. Many adult literacy learners have needs other than literacy, needs they might ask their tutor to help them with. How would you respond to the statement that at times literacy tutors play the role of a social worker?

QUESTIONS SPECIFIC TO COORDINATORS

29. What made you decide to be a coordinator?
30. How did you prepare yourself for the role (extra reading, training, etc)?
31. How have your experiences as a coordinator deepened your understanding of literacy and learners?
32. How much contact should there be, in your opinion, between tutors and their coordinators?
33. How much feedback do you want from the tutors on how the matches go?

    How much feedback do you receive?
34. Do you think that the organizing team of the program, and the tutors share similar views and understanding of the role of the club and its mandate on literacy?
35. Do you plan to continue working with literacy groups after you leave this program?